

## Italian Soldiers in WWI and the Emergence of a National Culinary Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** Emilio Lusso (2014, pp.127–128), in his WWI memoir of the Italian southern front, remembers his orderly telling him: ‘I like eating all those little birds with polenta, don’t get me wrong. Fig peckers are tasty. But, no offense to the Veneto, I prefer roasted blackbirds and thrushes.’ The birds, he insists, must be roasted on a wooden spit, never metal: ‘You have to use soft wood. Chew on it a little and check the flavor.’ Encounters over food customs, choices, and preferences are consequences of war’s disruption. This disruption of foodways is most immediately felt in terms of shortages, rationing, and starvation, and food shortages can also be drivers of war (Collingham, 2012, p.16). Here, however, we examine how the disruption and dislocation of war triggers encounters between people of different culinary identities, which are potentially sites for cultural transfer. Cultural transfer is a mutual restructuring involving cultural interactions and mutual adaptations (Manz and Panayi, 2012, p.132), which may involve explicit knowledge transfer as described above, but also the development of sensory predispositions to new foods through smell, appearance, or taste. The vast mobilization of soldiers from different regions of this young Italian nation exposed soldiers of diverse culinary and linguistic traditions to food they had never eaten before. WWI forged a ‘national diet’ contributing to what is now known as *la cucina italiana* (Sonenfeld, 2003, p.xi). Using letters, diaries, and memoirs, this paper describes Italian soldiers’ encounters with different culinary traditions and their role in an emergent national culinary identity.

World War I saw the mobilization of soldiers in hitherto unprecedented numbers: an estimated 65 million soldiers served, of whom 5 million were Italian soldiers. Given the view that military service is a driver of national consciousness, the vast conscription of Italians could be seen as moulding the national identity of this relatively young nation. Nationalists also called *La Grande Guerra* the Fourth War of the Independence – the previous three fought in the period 1848–1866 – and the final completion of Italian unification. If the war did not rise to the level of forging a national consciousness, as the Fascists later claimed, it nevertheless, as Wilcox has argued, provided ‘a vital moment of encounter: Italian men met and mingled with others from all over the country, and had the chance to feel that they were part of something much larger than themselves’ (2011, p.288). These encounters offered a space to explore the concept of *italianità*.

The aspect of *italianità* that concerns us here is the role of these encounters in the development of a *cucina italiana*. Encounters with food are consequences of war’s upheavals. Disruptions are immediately felt in terms of shortages, rationing, and starvation, and food shortages can also be drivers of war (Collingham, 2012, p.16). Here, however, in the context of Italy, we examine how war allowed encounters between peoples of different culinary identities, and were potential sites for cultural transfer. The vast mobilization of soldiers from different regions exposed soldiers to food they had never eaten before. According to Sonenfeld (2003, xi), WWI forged a ‘national diet.’ For Capatti et al. (1998), the war ‘provided an occasion for millions of peasants at the front to savour, albeit in the dramatic setting of the trenches, meat, pasta, bread made of wheat, wine, coffee’ (quoted in Montanari 2013, p.54). Furthermore there were further encounters with new foods through foraging, and theft. Montanari concludes that this forced intermingling of young Italians, who had hitherto lived in isolated worlds, gave many ‘their first exposure to different cultural and alimentary realities. In this way, an ‘Italian’ alimentary model could be shared and spread to new social strata’ (2013, p.54).

Our goal here is to explore these encounters with food through the letters, diaries, and memoirs of Italian soldiers. We begin with some background on Italy and WWI, and discuss Montanari’s claim (2013) that the peninsula was already unified in terms of shared culinary practices. Then we explore the notion of cultural transfer and what constitutes food encounters. After discussing where our data comes from, we use these primary sources to illuminate the ways in which Italian soldiers encountered new culinary knowledge and experiences.

### The Italian Army and the Southern Front

Italy entered the war in May 1915 on the side of the Allies. It could have quite easily sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary, with whom Italy had been joined in the Triple Alliance since 1882. Italy’s main aim in entering the war was to recover the *terre irredente* – unredeemed lands, which had large Italian speaking populations – Trento, South Tyrol, and Trieste. Italy calculated that it would have a better chance of recovering these lands through an alliance with France and Great Britain than with the Central Powers. This meant opening up a 375-mile southern front with the Austria-Hungarian army from Trentino, arcing northeast through the Dolomites and Carnic Alps, and then running southwards along the

Isonzo River to the Adriatic. Most of the fighting took place at high altitudes in freezing temperatures, and like the Western Front, the lines changed little for two and half years as an advance one day was pushed back the next with massive casualties on both sides. The first breakthrough came on the Isonzo Front at Caporetto in November 1917 as the Austrians, reinforced by Germans, routed the Italians.

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### Italy's Culinary Identity in 1915

In 1861 with the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy, Massimo d'Azeglio is reputed to have commented: 'Italy is made, now let us make Italians.' It is an aphorism that Montanari wants to turn on its head, rather 'Italians finally made Italy' (2013, p.xiv). For some, Montanari argues, Italy had existed long before 1861 in the form of a shared set of cultural practices and expectations, amongst which, shared alimentary and gastronomic models were a key factor in the development of a collective Italian identity. In other words, Montanari argues that food helped create Italians before there was an Italy. From the fourteenth century onwards, northern and central city states, each controlling their surrounding rural economies, circulated their produce through a system of urban markets. Prestigious cheeses – parmigiano, piacentino, and lodigiano – were traded throughout the peninsula, and became the accepted condiment for pasta for the better off (p.8). 'The cultural result,' Montanari argues, 'is that this movement of products leads to shared alimentary tastes and practices' (p.8). So an evolving 'Italian' gastronomic identity is one factor in an evolving 'Italian' cultural identity.

In this evolving culinary identity, Montanari sees the role of cookbooks like Artusi's *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene* (*The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well*), first published in 1891, as both reflecting and promoting a growing *cucina italiana*. Montanari describes Artusi's cookbook as 'a genuine 'national' cookbook.' (2013, p.47). Pietro Camporesi, in his preface to a modern edition, claims 'that *La scienza in cucina* did more for national unification than *I Promessi Sposi*' (Quoted in Montanari, 2013, p.52). Whereas, Manzoni's classic novel had set out to unify the country through language, Montanari argues that 'Science in the Kitchen' set out to unify its gastronomic practices while promoting 'diversity as an indivisible element of national identity' (2013, p.49).

If we can agree with Montanari that by 1915, on the eve of the war, there already existed a notion of a national culinary identity, this was by no means as inclusive by geography and social class as it was to become. Despite its inclusion of recipes from all over the country, 'Science in the Kitchen' still heavily favoured the 'Emilia, Romagna, Tuscan axis' (Montanari, 2013, p.49). More importantly, it disregarded the millions of Italians whose diets were severely impoverished. The Italian consumption of meat at about 16 kilos per capita per year lagged far behind Germany at 40 kilos, 55 in the United States, and 58 in

Great Britain (Montanari, 2013, p.53). Meat was used sparingly as a condiment on bread, pasta, and polenta, and, in the form of beef, was kept for illness (Helstosky, 2004, p.14). So in the period before WWI, Italian diets were heavy on carbohydrates: polenta, potatoes, rice, and bread. The most dramatic effect of this impoverished diet was the enormous emigration that began after 1880. Artusi may have provided a template for an Italian cuisine, but many people could not afford it. In fact, for the underfed millions, 'the only way to start eating like an Italian was to leave Italy altogether' (Dickie, 2007, p.232). The vast intermingling of Italians in WWI brought together two very different culinary identities: those who were familiar with the foodstuffs that circulated throughout Italy and their use in local dishes, and those for whom food was whatever they could afford in order to fill their ever-hungry stomachs.

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### Food Encounters and Cultural Transfer

In our study of Italian WWII POWs in Britain (Bell and Moran, 2019), we examined how encounters between POWs and their hosts predisposed the British to the massive cultural transfer of Italian food, dress, and design from the late 1950s onwards. We defined cultural transfer as a mutual restructuring involving cultural interactions and mutual adaptations between the majority and minority culture. In the context of Italian soldiers in WWI, we examine encounters between disparate but ostensibly similar cultural groups who share the same peninsula space and inchoate nationality. These encounters were complicated by regional, north versus south, social class, urban versus rural, and linguistic distinctions. But despite these antagonisms, every interactant, according to Manz and Panayi (2012), is 'a knowledge bearer with the potential to transfer knowledge to others regardless of whether the encounter is forced or voluntary, or whether the transfer was solicited or unsolicited by the receiving cultural context' (p.132). In the following, paragraphs we give two examples of encounters and cultural transfers.

Emilio Lusso, a junior officer in the Sardinian Sassari Brigade, remembers in his WWI memoir his orderly telling him: 'I like eating all those little birds with polenta, don't get me wrong. Fig peckers are tasty. But, no offense to the Veneto, I prefer roasted blackbirds and thrushes' (2014, p.127). The orderly, like Lusso, was Sardinian. The Sassari Brigade was unique in that it was made up exclusively of soldiers from Sardinia. The Southern Front was fought mainly in Veneto, where front line soldiers like Lusso and his orderly would also have spent their rest periods in small towns on the plains, often in contact with the local population. It was therefore natural that the orderly would have contrasted his Sardinian experiences of eating small birds with that which he had learned from encounters with locals in the Veneto. The orderly further described what he considered appropriate cooking methods. The birds, he insisted, must be roasted on a wooden spit, never metal:

‘You have to use soft wood. Chew on it a little and check the flavor’ (p.128).

Another remarkable example of cultural transfer resulted in the creation of two cookbooks by Italian POWs in the Celle camp, Germany. In 1917 the Italian Army suffered its worst ever defeat at Caporetto, when just under 300,000 Italian soldiers were captured, of whom one in six died from hunger. So bad was the hunger that some POWs were shot for encroaching on the perimeter fence in search of a mouthful of grass (Dickie, 2007, p.253). Amidst this horror and death, and maybe in reaction to it, Italian POWs produced two handwritten cookbooks. The first, *Arte culinaria (Culinary Art)* by Lieutenant Giuseppe Chioni is a compilation of the recipes his fellow prisoners remembered their mothers and wives cooking for them. Chioni explains in the preface that it grew out of a ‘reciprocal exchange of memories, regrets, and desires,’ (Chioni and Forentino, 2008). With over 400 recipes, adorned with crude illustrations of dishes and utensils, the cookbook was one of the most geographically representative Italian cookbooks ever put together and also inclusive of both richer and poorer cuisines. The cookbook also reflects the many dialects and accents that intermingled in the camp. Chioni, from Genova, wrongly transcribes *spaghetti all’amatriciana*, a dish from Rome, as *alla madrigiana*, which was how it sounded to a northerner when pronounced in a Roman accent (Dickie, 2007, p.259). Likewise, Chioni maintained regional lexical choices, using *acciughe* (anchovy) in recipes from the north and centre, and *alici* for recipes from the south. Remarkably, the camp also produced another cookbook, unconnected to Chioni’s. Another lieutenant, Giosuè Fiorentino from Sicily, collected recipes from all over Italy, each recipe hand-written by the POW who suggested it: Sicilian *arancine* or rice balls, Sardinian *culingiones* (pasta envelopes filled with fresh cheese and vegetables), and Roman *maccheroni* with *pajata* (veal intestines), for example (Chioni and Forentino, 2008).

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## Sources

We drew on many primary sources in an attempt to reflect social class and geographic diversity. We used published memoirs and diaries of the war by highly literate officers: Lussu (2014), Toscano (2020), and Calamandrei (2015). To reflect the experiences of the lower ranks, we drew on letters and postcards in existing collections: Bellosi and Savini (2002), Caffarena (2005), Procacci (1993), Spitzer (1976). Diaries in the form of notebooks kept by ordinary soldiers were accessed through the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale’s online resource: *La Grande Guerra 1914–1918*, a collaboration between the Espresso publishing group and the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale at Pieve Santo Stefano, Tuscany.

## Food Encounters in World War I

### *Army Food*

At the beginning of the war, the army hoped to provide daily rations of about 3,500 calories comprising 750 grams of bread, 375 grams of meat, 200 grams of pasta plus small amounts of chocolate, coffee, sugar, cheese, wine and condiments, but due to shortages the meat ration was more likely around 300 grams. Eighteen months later, rations were reduced to 250 grams of meat alternating with salt cod and 600 grams of bread for a total of 3,000 grams. The reduction was not only due to shortages but also due to the belief that the original diet was too nutritious and rich for peasant soldiers (Wilcox 2016, p.105). It was true that the meat ration, even when it fell to 200 grams daily, was far more than peasants had been used to eating. Infantryman Giacomo Alessandri writes in March 1918:

The only thing better about here compared to Bagnacavallo is the food. We get a loaf in two large hunks, a piece of good parmesan cheese, and a quarter liter of wine each day, and we get good coffee in the morning. (Bellosi & Savini, 2014, p.106).

Filiberto Boccacci (no date), an infantryman on the Isonzo Front, writes in July 1915: ‘I eat really mouthwatering food like tins of jam, and marmalade, and hot sauce. It is hard to believe, eh? But it’s true’ (para.4). Another soldier, Aldo Polcri (no date), who operated the mule trains on the Slovenian Front, lists the food he eats: a hot sandwich with two anchovies inside, cod, ham, salami, dried figs, chocolate, beans, chestnuts, lamb, oil condiments, lard, tomato paste. ‘In short, with regard to food, we are better off than before’ (para. 3). But for others, the reduced rations and their irregular supply were critical. One infantryman described his comrades as ‘shattered with hunger and sleep – tears fill our eyes, crying like babies’ (Procacci 1993, p. 45 translation by Wilcox 2016, p.106).

Another major factor that affected the rations was the logistical problem of getting food from the field kitchens to the trenches. Transporting the cooked meals by mule train overnight had a deleterious effect on the food. Pasta or rice in large pots would reach the trenches as sticky blocks, the soup would be cold and turned to jelly, and the meat and the bread would be as hard as rock. Warming the food a second time only made the food impossible to eat. (*Itinerari della Grande Guerra—Un viaggio nella storia*).

Grappa, brandy, and tobacco were also periodically distributed, especially before an attack on enemy lines. Lussu (2014) describes the troops in the trenches:

You couldn’t hear a whisper. The only things moving were the canteens of brandy. From the belt to the mouth, from the mouth to the belt, from the belt to the mouth without interruption, set in motion like shuttles on a giant loom (p.115).

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Once the attack begins, Lussu vividly describes the smell of brandy coming from the Austrians: 'From the Austrian ranks came an odor of brandy, thick, condensed, as though it were bursting forth from some dank wine cellars, closed for years' (p.42). If Italians had never drunk brandy or grappa before, they certainly are most likely to have done so once they found themselves in the trenches.

There was certainly a marked distinction in the quality and abundance of the officers' food compared to the troops. The war diaries of Pietro Calamandrei (2015) give an insight into the life and privileges of an officer. Originally from Florence, he left his faculty position at the University of Messina to volunteer for the army and moved up the ranks to captain. In his diaries, Calamandrei gives many detailed descriptions of the food in the officers' mess. The arrival of a new colonel prompts battalions to compete against each other in a series of banquets that offer delicacies such as salmon, strawberries, and vanilla ice cream. He describes an Easter meal:

Our Easter lunch was huge: we ate well, as we always do up here, finishing up with a *millefoglie* (1) made by a Florentine cook, and was just as good as those that Mother used to order in Piazza Madonna (Marano: 1 April 1918)

By contrast, Giuseppe Tiburni (no date), a trumpeter in the Bersaglieri (2) was given a ration of half a pound of rice and two cans of sardines in oil, which he ate with a whole loaf, 'and so I do Easter lunch' (para.16).

As with the *millefoglie*, Calamandrei (2015) is always comparing food in the war zone to other times and places. He eats *polpettone* (meatloaf) but adds that it is not as good as the one his wife makes in Messina (Contrada Bosco: 30 May 1917). In the general's mess, the 'tender and tasty poached trout' reminds him of the sole at the Messina fish market. The trout is followed by individual portions of *latte alla portoghese* (similar to flan), which does not have, for Calamandrei, the wholesome and persistent taste of the original (Colle Pasquali: 28 June 1917). He goes to a *pasticcERIA* (confectionary shop) and eats candied fruit and bonbons made from chestnut paste that he knows cannot be found in Florence (Bolzano: 4 December 1918).

### *Theft and Foraging*

Another way that troops encountered foods that they may have never eaten before was through theft and foraging. We use 'theft' to refer to Italian soldiers stealing provisions from their own food supplies whether by individuals or organized groups. We use 'foraging' in a military sense to refer to the appropriation of civilian and enemy food sources as distinct from looting, which refers to the stealing of non-food objects. We also use foraging in its more benign sense with regard to the collection of wild plants and windfall.

Lussu (2014) describes a spectacular act of theft by one of his lieutenants, who had asked for authorization to do a

live war exercise with the battalion's ski squad. Unknown to Lussu, the real purpose of the exercise was to make a lightning-fast raid on the division's supply depot and take away as much of the stockpile of wine and liqueurs, dry-cured hams, mortadella sausages, salamis, and cheeses as possible. The exercise was successful and that same night the food and wine was distributed to the soldiers. Lussu learned about the theft from another of his officers: 'My men were eating ham and salami all night long. Some of them got indigestion. They must have been dying of thirst. I had some flasks of wine brought in because apparently the stolen bottles weren't enough to go around' (p.221). It was then that Lussu realized that he himself had been a beneficiary of the theft in the form of four bottles of Barbera, ostensibly to celebrate his lieutenant's grandfather's saint's day.

If theft may have given lower ranks some unexpected opportunities to enjoy luxury foods, it more usually deprived them of even basic rations. Agostino Tambuscio (no date), a gunner on the Isonzo Front, recounts a score he and his comrades had to settle with the cooks in the field kitchens because they had never received their allotted rations. The cooks:

swore that they had regularly prepared and sent the daily rations including bread and wine. But then, where did they end up? What about those ambushed drivers? The drivers said that as they were bringing the food to the front, they were stopped by units who claimed that they were assigned to take the food on to the frontline (para 2).

Tambuscio was convinced that the cooks were lying and doubted whether the food was ever sent in the first place. Undoubtedly the reason why foods like chocolate, coffee and alcohol did not reach the frontlines was because of theft. Officers often skimmed off the best rations intended for the men. There was a widespread perception that officers were being better fed at the lower ranks' expense:

There is less to eat every day... the little bit of pasta allotted to us, becomes even less because the officers take some for themselves so that they can have pasta twice a day and meat too. Passing the officers' mess hall, you can smell the wonderful aroma of boiled and roasted meats and steaks... (Procacci, 1993, p.426)

Greater opportunities for theft came at times of retreat, especially after the defeat at Caporetto. These food thefts allowed ordinary troops to encounter foods they may never have eaten before. Giuseppe Tiburni (no date) of the 17th Bersaglieri recounts how his lieutenant ordered his platoon to set fire to the remaining food supplies warehouse once the regiment had retreated. But before they torched the warehouse, they took bread, cheese, and ration tins as well as a demijohn of wine and one of anise, and a small barrel of marsala, and eat and drank and waited for the regiment to pass (para.2).

The more benign notion of foraging for wild produce and windfall may have exposed soldiers to new foods and new ways of preparing them. Calamandrei (2015) describes a recipe for caramelized chestnuts:

Our cook has made caramelized chestnuts from 300 kilos of foraged chestnuts. I want to tell you the recipe, because I like it a lot and I want you to make it when sugar is no longer rationed. After the chestnuts are roasted, he peels them and puts them on 6 inch long sticks, like the candied fruit that old ladies sold in front of the elementary school. Then he drizzles on caramelized sugar, and serves two skewers of sweetened chestnuts to each person (Fusine: 20 October 1917).

Infantryman Eugenio Lavatori (no date) near the frontline at Monte Nero also remembers cooking chestnuts on an open fire and drinking wine: 'a perfect joy. Everyone like brothers' (para 4).

Cesare Ermano Bertini (no date), in the trenches at Monfalcone (Gorizia), describes how his hunger drove him to forage in front of enemy lines with almost disastrous results. There was a vineyard just outside his trench and close to the enemy, so he and his comrade decided to go pick the grapes. But as soon as they had stuffed themselves 'fit to burst', their own lookouts spotted them and mistaking them for the enemy, shouted: 'There are two Austrians. Maybe they want to surrender' (para. 7). Likewise, Piero Rosa (no date) of the heavy artillery regiment on the Slovenian front remembers spotting an abandoned vineyard still replete with luxuriant bunches of grapes and waiting until nightfall to start the harvest (para 1).

While the massive retreat after the defeat at Caporetto brought about opportunities for theft of food supplies from army supplies it also prompted foraging from the stores and homes of fleeing civilians. Elio Nerucci (no date) recalls entering an abandoned town where they found two chickens and two lambs in one of the wealthier households. They eat the chickens but set the lambs free (para. 14). Artilleryman, Adolfo Ballini (no date), recalls killing a calf they had found and cooking it: 'we eat it, without bread, and without salt but it is so good anyway' (para. 7). Giuseppe Manetti (no date) recalls a grocery store looting: 'There is a grocery store already ransacked by soldiers. They walk out holding two, three, five bottles of eggnog liqueur, wine, cans of preserved meat' (para. 2). Foraging also took place when the Italian forces advanced. Gunner Otello Ferri (no date) describes foraging amongst the houses in Bigliana, Slovenia:

During the night we searched several houses and found a lot of stuff among which was a pig, which Mazzetti slaughtered in the middle of the road and threw it on a cart. Valoti and I took chickens. In a house we found cooked potatoes which I made into a salad and ate them with Civico and Geraluti [...] We boiled the pork and ate it the next day. It was a day of looting (para. 4).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored Italian soldiers' encounters with food in WWI through their letters, diaries, and memoirs. This vast mobilization from every part of the peninsula exposed soldiers of diverse culinary traditions to encounters with food that facilitated cultural transfer involving both explicit knowledge of foodstuffs and recipes and also the more implicit development of sensory predispositions to new foods. We have restricted ourselves to institutionalized encounters with army food and non-sanctioned encounters with foraged and stolen food. Other encounters with foods, either purchased from, or donated by, local populations and shared or bartered traditional home cooked foods sent to the soldiers by their families, still further contributed to the development of a national culinary identity. These avenues remain to be explored and researched.

## Notes

1. A Tuscan cake made of 'thousands' of delicate layers of puff pastry and vanilla cream.
2. Light infantry.

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